

Abused as children — let's not betray them as adults

THE most harmful thing about sexual abuse is the extremely invalidating impact it has on a person.



Picture: GLENN FERGUSON

SCARRED: Church abuse victims, from left, Joseph Saric, Chris Pianto and Max Johnson with Fr Kevin Dillon (second from right), who provided advocacy during the parliamentary inquiry into sexual abuse.

The abusive experience typically causes sufferers to feel that they don't count. Their wishes and interests and feelings don't count. They have been treated as an object for the sexual gratification of the perpetrator.

It strips them of their dignity and humanity.

Compounding this situation, those who have been sexually abused may take unwarranted responsibility for the abuse having occurred. Their sense of personal blame or responsibility is usually influenced by the perpetrators having taken no responsibility for the abuse themselves.

Perpetrators rarely acknowledge that the person they sexually abused was in an uncommonly vulnerable position because of the perpetrator's additional power or authority in the relationship, including having been held in a position of trust.

Common trauma reactions of those who have been sexually abused include lingering intrusive distressing thoughts, visual images and feelings related to the abuse itself. Any reminder of the abuse may trigger an intense burst of anger or fear.

People may try to deal with such distress by avoiding a range of situations and numbing their feelings. This commonly leads people's emotional and social lives to be more restricted, and perhaps chaotic.

Those experiencing psychological trauma from sexual abuse by a previously trusted individual are especially vulnerable to a wide range of psychological and social problems. These include persistent anxiety, recurrent depression, substance abuse (commonly for self-medication), difficulty managing anger, sleep problems, and relationship problems.

Those affected may forever remain more wary and distrustful in relationships. They are more prone to physical illness and complaints.

How people respond to trauma is greatly influenced by the reactions of those around them. Individuals who have been sexually abused tend not to speak up about the abuse because of an unwarranted sense of guilt or shame. They fear how others will respond, including whether they will be believed.

This adds to concerns about the inadequate response by many religious and community care organisations regarding allegations of sexual abuse by one of their members. Any response that denies or minimises abuse, or disowns any responsibility of the perpetrator, compounds the distress of the person who was abused.

It is important that people who report abuse are supported and have a safe place to which to turn. Many individuals who have reported church-related sexual abuse have found the opposite to occur at their time of reporting it, and for a long time thereafter.

As the broader community is coming to understand more about potential consequences of sexual abuse, greater steps are being taken to address it. One example is the establishment of the Royal Commission into Institutional Child Sexual Abuse.

A most heartening local development has been the leadership of Fr Kevin Dillon, parish priest of St Mary's, in establishing a support committee for those who have suffered from church-related sexual abuse. The committee, called Lifeboat Geelong, recognises the harmful effects of abuse and offers help and tangible support to sufferers to show their plight is recognised — and that they do count.

Lifeboat Geelong will be officially launched at 7.30pm at The Pier on Wednesday, April 22. All are welcome to attend to learn more about and to lend support to this promising initiative.



Chris Mackey is a Fellow of the Australian Psychological Society and is the principal psychologist at Chris Mackey and Associates, with 35 years' experience in public and private mental health services in Geelong.

Printed and distributed by NewspaperDirect | www.newspaperdirect.com, US/Can: 1.877.980.4040, Intern: 800.6364.6364 | Copyright and protected by applicable law.

[Previous Story](#)

[Next Story](#)